



**“With the heart of a mother”.....**

***The care of the dying***

Our Life on this earth is a journey, along the road of which we are often confronted by death. Death is a “presence” in our lives which stops us, especially in certain circumstances such as the death of a loved one, a sudden death, the grave illness of a child, or in the case of a violent death, and obliges us to reflect. Perhaps we sometimes try to distance the thought of death from our lives

Today, at least in the western world, death tends to be “exorcised” from daily life and almost hidden away. It happens more and more that the person no longer dies in their own home but rather in hospital or a nursing home. The gestures that accompany death, like the liturgical celebrations for the baptised (the sacrament of the sick and viaticum) or even the funeral itself are celebrations which are lived almost stealthily. This is so different to what happened in the fairly recent past when the local community and the neighbours gathered in the home of the deceased for community prayer or to support the family members. Paradoxically, together with this experience of silence you find today a type of “spectacularisation” of death. We all see this on our television screens where we are daily bombarded with cases of violent deaths, wars, terrorist attacks and famine. These images are often crude and violent and they have become part of our daily diet, and no longer surprise or disturb us too much. Maybe this is because they happen far away or because we feel that they have “*nothing to do with us*”.

Our culture has dehumanised death. Two difficulties arise if we are to humanise death: there is the awful situation of dying alone must be confronted, and on the other hand the situation of not having the necessary space to die. The person who is facing the agonising moment of leaving this world is aware of their need to be reassured by the presence of somebody close to him/her (a family member, a friend...), and at the same time of the need for the psychological space required to take leave of this earth. Confronted by these ever present problems, which affect the lives of everyone, we are faced with a few questions. Do we feel that we have a role to fulfill here?

**How do you help someone to die: is it possible?**

The dying person is often alone because medical science goes as far it can go and then surrenders, because “there is nothing more to do”. There are other situations of abandonment, of the breaking with family bonds (I’m thinking of HIV/Aids sufferers). But does it have to be like that?



## SECOND LCF INTERNATIONAL MANUAL OF FORMATION

A nurse working in Palliative Care, speaking of her experience, affirms that *“there is still a lot that can be done: gestures, words, smiles and tears that draw you close to the person and help to forget the disagreements”*. So now we ask ourselves how can I approach (help) the sick person as death approaches? How can we journey with him/her?

This question is very real for Lay Camillian Family members who in their own lives have made a choice to live the Christian life by allowing themselves be enlightened, guided and sustained by the charism and spirituality of St. Camillus de Lellis. It is by embracing the example of the saint and his teachings that we find light and guidance on our daily journey. After all we know that it can be difficult *“to draw close to the sick”*, and to know how to serve them; how can we be present to a seriously ill person or one who is close to death? We may at times be tired, and it requires real commitment if we are to *“stop”*, listen and console a person close to death. Apart from the effort that we make, we discover that the sick person helps us on our journey, gives us wisdom for life, and a new consciousness as to what are the important values in our lives. St Camillus was won’t to say to his religious, *“more heart in your hands”*: we too today are invited to put more heart in our hands as we assist the sick and harmonise both aspects of our care: physically assisting, caring, and helping the sick, while also using our heart so that *every moment of life’s existence is lived in the most “human” way possible*

We need to acquire competence through faithfulness to our **on- going formation** so we can learn to unite knowledge and heart, physical care and support.

Let us make our own the words of St. Paul: *“If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love I am simply a gong booming of a cymbal clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and if I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all. In short there are three things that last: faith, hope and love: and the greatest of these is love” (1Cor 13, 1-2, 13)*

These words indicate to us the style of presence we must aspire to. They indicate to us the Christian way of acting. We have many commitments, and we tend to live constantly with the watch in our hand..... but sometimes we need to stop and reflect as to what exactly is our “treasure”, and ask ourselves if we are guarding and cultivating that gift with love.



## Death and assisting the dying

The subject of death and caring for the dying opens a range of physical, psychological and spiritual problems. There are specific competencies when it comes to dealing with bad news or the closing in of death. There are the fears that assail the person, mingled with the hope they cling to (Elizabeth Kubler-Ross). We cannot here engage in a deep psychological discussion. Here we can only offer some of the reflections as set out in the book of the Camillian priest Arnaldo Pangrazzi: “Vivere il tramonto” (Living the sunset).

- The presence of somebody with the dying is a gift. And indeed it is a gift to be able to overcome our difficulties in relating to a person and their illness, so we don't stay away from their bedside because *“we don't know what to say”*.
- We accept the sentiments of the sick without judging or seeking to justify God, but rather we learn to have empathy and reflect their sentiments, thus showing our understanding. The acceptance of the persons' sentiments brings great relief and leads to a gradual resolution of their issues and a growing inner peace.
- Our attitude should not be one of pity or commiseration but of comprehension, presence and closeness.
- We learn to value silence. So often it is the simple act of being present which is the gift that is most welcomed by the one who is suffering, as they wish to be quiet. We respect that their desire to be left alone may be their way of saying good bye to the people, to the world.
- We should not be afraid of physical contact and showing closeness through a simple gesture of affection, or a holding of hands
- Accept the confidences they share and the particular state of spirit (soul) in which they find themselves, such as their desire to be reconciled with relatives.
- We should be aware of relatives and their need for comfort and consolation. This will mean being attentive to the verbals and non-verbals of children and responding to them honestly.
- If the sick person so desires, pray with them and those who are present



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- Respect the space and desires of the dying, and be prepared to facilitate the good byes and encourage the verbalization of messages to loved ones
- Propose and offer the comfort of the sacraments like the Sacrament of the Sick, the Eucharist, Reconciliation and Penance, and Viaticum.
- Respect the surrounds of the sick person, and of the staff who are caring for them.

We are aware of our need for attention, and for formation if we are to journey with a sick person and be able to acknowledge his spiritual needs such as:

- The search for meaning in the light of approaching death
- Reconciliation is expressed frequently in the need to pardon and be pardoned (often there are family conflicts and other difficulties to be cleared out of the way).
- The search for solidarity and the need for help which can be fulfilled through the presence of family, friends and volunteers.
- The questions of “life beyond life”, eternity
- The awareness that separation has to be faced, and the need to say good bye.

### **With the heart of a Mother**

Let us return to the title of our reflection taken from St. Camillus :

*“First and foremost each one of us needs to ask the Lord for the gift of maternal affection, so that we can care for our neighbour, both in body and soul, with great love. In fact through the grace of God we wish to serve all the sick with that love that a mother has for her only child who is ill. This is our principal reason for being Camillians: to assist even the plague ridden both in body and soul, with the real fervour of love”.*



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*“Everyone of us needs to ask the Lord.....”* St Camillus says to his followers. The gift of seeking in prayer is at the very heart of the life of a disciple and follower of Christ. This prayer should be constant and faithful. It should be capable of reading the signs of the times in faith and hope, and be at the heart of the choices we make, even when they are demanding. Our availability for service, our faithfulness to our commitment even when difficult, our closeness to those whom we assist, are all enlightened by our daily relationship with the Lord.

What should we ask? *“Grace”*, Camillus continues. This is what we should ask for in prayer.

*“With maternal affection to our neighbour”*. With these words our reflection becomes more concrete as it reflects on the experience of life. How expansive the love of a mother truly is! Perhaps we too know mothers who know how to be with their own child day and night, in total dedication, forgetting themselves, even in their tiredness. The experience of seeing a mother by the side of her own child immediately highlights the meaning and need for sacrifice.

It involves the *“feminine”* way of caring for and understanding the suffering of another.

Mary, who remained beside her son Jesus in all the circumstances of his life, springs immediately to mind. Very few words of Mary have survived, and those that have are to be found in John’s gospel (Jn 2, 1-10), at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, at a wedding feast. Our Lady notices that they have no wine, and aware that this shortage would have ruined the feast, she says to the servants, *“Do whatever He tells you”* (v. 5), and so the first miracle takes place. Then we find Mary at the foot of the cross together with John. Mary’s presence is quiet as she suffers along with her Son who is dying on the cross.



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We too need to be able to open our hearts to hear the whispers and murmurings of the dying, and make their pain ours. And we need to do so with the love and tenderness of a mother. We take to our hearts their suffering, their silent suffering, their fear, and transform it all into prayer.

*“For her only child who is ill”*, continues St. Camillus in his “Rule” for his religious. He does not just say *with the affection of a mother for her child*, but for *her only child* who is ill. This is to underline with the greatest force what the attitude of a Camillian attitude should be. A love that is selfless.

### **How should the Lay Camillian Family act**

On the journey of the disciple of Jesus, (*who is the merciful face of the Father*), and for the members of the school of St. Camillus, there must be a community dimension. The life lived in the Lay Camillian Family is the place where we must find our communion.

- It is here that we deepen our motivation, our sense of belonging, continue our on-going formation, and learn to stay with the sick, and particularly the dying.
- It is here that we share our life’s experience of service
- It is here we should find the support that we need. Through the deepening of our understanding of the Word of God, our participation in the sacraments, a deeper knowledge of St. Camillus and his charism and spirituality, a communion among ourselves and with the Camillian religious, all set the tone for our way of life as Lay Camillian members. It is the basis for our presence and is expressed through solidarity with the dying as we try to accompany them on their journey.

Camillus asks of his disciples *“to assist even the plague stricken, both in body and soul”*. He requires a total commitment, given without holding anything back. This continues today for Camillian religious through the profession of their 4<sup>th</sup> vow.



## SECOND LCF INTERNATIONAL MANUAL OF FORMATION

*“With the real fervour of love...”*. We can only give up our life for love. Our life has been given to us gratuitously and with it we receive gifts each day. It is only a love freely given that can be re-donated. The word *“fervour”* suggests a daily solicitude and concern which becomes a gesture of love. As we become aware of the love we have received, we can then in our turn re-donate.

Our lives are always lived and enriched through relationships. Firstly with the One on High, with Jesus Christ who calls us by name, who loves us, and always welcomes us. Because we are sure of His love and fidelity we can *“cast our net into the deep”* and accompany the dying person. Our own faith and the certainty that ours is a *“hope that cannot die”* will be strengthened by our relationship with the dying lived in freedom, respect, and nourished by prayer.

We are involved in *“recognising in those who seek our love, the face of the risen Lord... It is faith that allows us to recognise Christ and his love as he encourages and leads us to reach out to our neighbour along the path of life* (Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*).

Let us ask Mary, Health of the Sick, to teach us to remain close to our brothers and sisters who are ill, even in the most difficult of situations.

May the witness of the Mother of Christ brighten our footsteps, so that we may live and proclaim the good Word of the Gospel, the Word that supports our footsteps in the certainty of the embrace of the Father and the Providence of God.

Let us ask Mary to accompany us to our encounter with God.

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Let us read a poem from Fr. L. Zanchetta

*When we re-consign our life*

*to God who donated it to us,*



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*we won't find anyone to teach us how to act.*

*Because death is a unique and unrepeatable act  
that awaits us all.*

*No one knows how that encounter will go.  
But all, if we believe the Gospel,  
will be concluded with one simple question: did you love?*

*We would like to respond with the words of the saints  
“Lord, I did not always love,  
but I always allowed myself be loved by you”.*

*Friend, if you assist a dying person  
Know that your presence is important,  
Your embrace beneficial, the warmth of your hand consoling*

*Don't leave alone the one who is about to knock  
at the door of the house of God*

*Solitude is a price  
Nobody should have to pay.  
Because we are all brothers and your children”*

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